3 spreadsheets stand out from pack

When assessing the dozens of spreadsheet programs available today, just three stand out and are worthy of your attention.

The one that's best for you depends upon your level of spreadsheet use:

■ The industry standard — Lotus 1-2-3. The wildfire acceptance of Lotus 1-2-3 when it was first released back in 1983, gave many businesses a reason for buying their first PC. Yet in the ever-changing world of PC software, where upgrades are constant, this venerable program has seen little change.

The program is available from Lotus Development Corp., 55 Cambridge Parkway, Cambridge, Mass. 02142, for $495.

■ All around power — Excel. A mighty challenger to the champ is Microsoft's Excel. Unencumbered with any need for downward compatibility, Excel requires that the user have one of the new breed of machines just to run the program. When it's fired up, Excel runs under the highly graphic Microsoft

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Windows. The reward is dazzling screens and more windows than a greenhouse.

Contact Microsoft Corp., 16011 N.E. 36th Way, Redmond, Wash. 98073. The cost is $495.

■ Quick access — Lucid 3-D. Unusual among spreadsheet programs, Lucid 3-D is a pop-up. As a memory-resident program, it can be flicked on or off while running other programs. Easy-to-use cut-and-paste functions encourage the mingling of data among many programs.

Lucid 3-D also has a pull down menu, but its commands differ from 1-2-3. The menu shows each layer of the pull-down hierarchy, a feature you'll appreciate if you've ever been lost deep in the bowels of a 1-2-3 menu.

It's available from DacEasy, 17950 Preston Road, Suite 800, Dallas, Texas 75252, for $99.95.

Despite all the new kids on the block, Lotus 1-2-3, the technological laggard, has ample reason for its swollen following.

As the first, Lotus owns the standard. Corporations that committed early to hundreds or thousands of copies of 1-2-3 are, by shear economic necessity, stuck in their ways.

1-2-3's pull-down, layered menus are now famous and widely copied. Built-in functions lead you into the darker corners of finance and statistics. A passable macro facility allows for sophisticated designs and repeatable templates.

Excel's processing power is unmatched in today's spreadsheet arena. Its advance recalculation techniques mean little waiting when trying new "what-if" scenarios.

The 3-D part of Lucid 3-D is its ability to link multiple spreadsheets. This nifty feature means

you can maintain a number of smaller spreadsheets instead of one giant one. Lucid 3-D also does windows — up to nine — which can be positioned, sized and overlapped in any manner.

■ The bottom line. All of these spreadsheets are full-featured business programs. Lotus still shoulders the standard, despite its reputation for slow updates.

Excel is a powerhouse, advanced program, but requires a heavy hardware investment and possible staff retraining.

Lucid 3-D is the easiest to have around, always at the ready to pop down over another program. For the cost, Lucid 3-D can be either a good starter program or a handy second program used in conjunction with one of the others.

My favorite is Lucid 3-D.

Hillel Segal's column evaluates gadgets, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity. Segal is a management consultant based in Boulder.